Collection Labeling: Simple Kit

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Collections label kit for small museums

The kit is designed for small museums with wide-ranging collections with everything from natural history specimens to fine art, where limited staff must wear many hats.

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- Acetone in dropper bottle Used for thinning down or removing B-72. Reagent grade acetone is better. Hardware store acetone has petroleum distillates, other impurities. It can work, but may make paper translucent and hard-to-read on dark materials. Sometimes it can behave unpredictably with B-72. Acetone is main ingredient in nail polish remover, so be aware fumes may be irritating. Flammable.
- Cotton swabs Simple Q-tips. Think twice about rubbing solvent on the surface of your artifact. Consider what material your item is made from.
- Funnel, mini For transfer of adhesive into smaller brush bottle, like polish bottle. When B-72 dries on tools or jars, it can be soaked in water overnight, and then peeled off.
- Needles, assorted "Sharps" are good for piercing Tyvek label, but could stab through fibers. Blunts or ball points are good for getting in between the weave gently, but work better with twill tape labels. Cheaper needles often have poorer quality "eyes" and can be harder to thread.
- Paraloid B-72 adhesive You can order this pre-mixed online specifically for object labeling purposes. It is a synthetic acrylic resin: 70% ethyl methacrylate 30% methyl acrylate copolymer. It works best no thicker than maple syrup most of the time. Even thinner is often fine. It is possible to just buy the B-72 resin beads and mix it yourself, but that technique works best with the resin beads suspended in the acetone in a little cheesecloth bag. Whiel B-72 is soluble in acetone, but does not go into ethanol easily.

Ethanol sometimes added to slow drying time. B-72 is thermoplastic, so if the lid sticks, running under hot water or using a hairdryer can help get it unstuck.

- Pen Use this pen for writing on tags and Tyvek. "Permanent" boasted by many pens often just means waterproof, not lightfast or non-bleeding. Dye-based inks often smear. Carbon black ink is lightfast: India ink or rapidograph ink. Quill pens take practice, can be gloppy, sharp, and may scratch. Technical pens are fussy (clog, need cleaning fluid, delicate tip, may scratch).
- #2 Pencil Typical graphite pencils are fine. HB pencils are also OK. Wonderfully reversible on many surfaces, especially paper, if you don't press too hard.
- Photo Pencil Use these for marking the back of photos printed on plastic. If you have a plastic photo, the right balance of sharp/dull regular #2 pencil may work if the plastic is not greasy from fingerprints or plasticizers.
- Polish bottle with brush lid for B-72 Nail polish is no good for labeling museum collections. It yellows, cracks, peels, ages poorly, and crosslinks making it hard to remove later. Remember, how long is it meant to last on your fingernails? Not archival! Correction fluid or Wite Out is also not OK, it peels off too easily, ages poorly, proprietary mixes vary widely. It is nice to buy B-72 already made, but the wide lid container causes it to dry out too fast. Use mini-funnel to transfer from bigger container into polish bottle. Also, if one jar dries out you have a back-up.
- When applying, think of a sandwich made by two layers of B-72 with label in the middle.
- Small scissors If you use the paper label technique, cutting a printed list of numbers into a "fringe" makes them easier to handle. Rounding the corners makes labels less likely to snag and pop off. Sewing scissors work well for this use, too.
- Small paper tags Don't use colored string. Sometimes it runs or bleeds. Replace with white string. Avoid tags with wire, wire edges, or metal grommets around holes…metal risks scratching and rust stains. If your budget permits, you might want to upgrade to artifact tags from archival supply companies. However, these cost more than the office-supply variety, which sometimes test slightly more alkaline (pH 7-8) than the expensive ones (pH 6-7). Both usually come with white cotton string.
- Thin labeling paper Interleaving tissue is nice, as thin as will go through your printer or photocopier. You might need to experiment with feed. Write the method that will work on your equipment on the cover of the folder you keep paper in. Some Japanese tissues may be too thin to print, or may get translucent with adhesive. Snipping your list of numbers into fringe helps keep track of tiny labels. Manipulation by curling over the fingernail to conform to curves or folding lengthwise for long items.
- Thread, white cotton A rule of thumb: the tie material should be softer than the object, so abrasion will damage the tie and not the artifact. Cotton is non-abrasive. Polyester is a little bit abrasive. Don't use thread with beads that have glass disease, it may help wick moisture inside. "Glide" or other brands of Teflon dental floss OK. Plumber's Teflon tape is OK. Regular dental floss not so good because it is usually made of nylon and ages

poorly, becoming brittle and breaking. Dental floss is often waxed as well. Plastic zip ties usually too rough, and are also usually nylon and will degrade, get brittle, and break. PVC plastic degrades and releases acids.

- Tweezers Pointy ones are helpful for manipulating paper labels.
- Tyvek, for labeling textiles Tyvek is spun-bonded from olefin fibers, an inert plastic. Mailing envelopes and home wrap are usually Tyvek and it is OK to use the non-printed, bare areas. Needle punch “soft” Tyvek and smooth “hard” Tyvek both OK. Alternatives include twill tape or Reemay. Twill tape is sometimes hard to write on without ink bleeding.
- White vinyl eraser For removing pencil marks. It can be helpful for removing tape residues from price tags or stickers as well.